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Spearheaded by Research Canada

National health research advocacy groups to share knowledge, insight with global alliance

By Mark Henderson

A Canadian advocacy group has spearheaded the creation of a global alliance of similar organizations to advocate for increased funding for health research to boost its impact and effectiveness. Research Canada has signed a letter of agreement with its counterparts in the US, Australia and Sweden to pool strategic intelligence, boost the profile and policy emphasis on health research and make the case for increased and sustained funding.

Although they vary considerably in size and age and face different challenges in their respective countries, the four organizations are optimistic that their collective experiences and collaboration can help convince governments and other players to invest in health research. RESEARCH MONEY recently interviewed the heads of the four groups to learn more about their individual experiences and plans for collaboration.

"We all share the view that the world is flat. Research is carried out in a global fashion and we need to work together internationally," says Research Canada President and CEO, Deborah Gordon-El Bihbety. "We want to build on our ad hoc relationship and look at an integrated approach. The alliance could become a force to be reckoned with."

Research! America

Research! America is the oldest and by far the largest of the advocacy groups with 420 members. It was established in 1989 to address a perceived deficiency in medical research funding. It was the first organization to call for a doubling of the budget of the National Institutes of Health and was instrumental in pushing for a rapid increase in health research funding in the 1990s and up until about 2003 when budgets flatlined.

Research! America's current preoccupation is the potentially devastating impact on sequestration on the health research budget. Sequestration refers to reductions to federal spending tied to austerity measures that kicked in this year with \$85.4 billion in cuts that are slated to increase to an average of \$238 billion annually.

"It's very bad. There are potentially significant cuts for the next 10 years," says Mary Woolley, who has served as Research! America's president since 1990. "After things improved dramatically in the 1990s, we are back to another low that couldn't have been anticipated ... There are now three budgets for Congress to consider — from the president, the House and the Senate. The House proposal is even worse than sequestration."

The challenges being tackled by Research! America extend beyond basic health research to health prevention and health services research. Despite the unique US environment, Woolley says the alliance

can help to demonstrate the benefits of other approaches to the health research enterprise.

"Our health care system is not even a system. It's in transition and needs a lot of work and health services research is not well funded," she says. "The alliance will take our partnership up a notch or two. We're eager to share best practices. The alliance is a tremendous opportunity for our membership because health research is global."

Research Canada

Research! America was the inspiration for Research Canada, which grew out of the Council for Health Research in Canada in 2005. Conceived as a multi-stakeholder organization with more than 100 members, Research Canada continues to advocate for investments in discovery research, as the funding landscape shifts towards targeted investments and increased academic-industry partnerships.

"With the economic downturn, a return-on-investment focus has become dominant. Canada is relatively new to health research investments and there was not much time between the build-up and the downturn," says Gordon-El Bihbety. "This is an imbalance between the four sets of stakeholders — government academe, industry and not-for-profits — and there are problems with venture capital. The last two Budgets have begun addressing this."

Through the global alliance, Research Canada hopes to gain valuable knowledge through use of new networks and access to different expertise and strategies.

"I'm dealing with myriad sectors and navigating them is a unique endeavour," says Gordon-El Bihbety. "The other organizations in the alliance understand these concerns intimately. Global teams are the way to go."

Research Australia

Research Australia was founded in 2000 and is most similar to Research Canada, as both represent commonwealth nations and grapple with jurisdictional issues between the federal and state levels. Established following the recommendation of a government strategic review of health and medical research, it has 170 members spanning the health care innovation spectrum.

The organization was recently successful in persuading the Australian government to undertake a review of the country's health and medical research regime which calls for 3-4% of health expenditures to be directed towards research. Now it's turning its focus towards Australia's six states, whose share of health and medical science funding has fallen from 15% to less than 10%.

"The global alliance may help us in this area with benchmarking and examples, information sharing, case studies and data and success stories," says Elizabeth Foley, Research Australia's managing director and CEO. "The alliance offers value and a much more shared vision. I'm surprised at the similarities we are facing."

Research! Sweden

Research! Sweden is the newest of the group, launched in 2010 when the country was still in the grip of the economic downturn. Established as a foundation, its members include representatives from academia, industry, labour and patient groups who — like Research Australia — saw the temptation for cuts to health research as the government sought to balance its books.

"It was a reaction to the quality of medical research falling, the number of companies falling and a health care system that was not open to new innovation," says Dr. Anna Nilsson Vindefjord, Research! Sweden's secretary general. "We needed to talk to the government in a constructive way. Many EU countries are

not increasing health research funding but Sweden is. It's still not enough. We would like to double funding."

"Advocacy is a tricky business, adds Gordon-El Bihbety. "Change rarely comes from the force of logic done on the basis of irrefutable evidence. If I bring my counterparts to Ottawa, they can show me what can be done in Canada. I hope we can help each other at that high level."

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